

## **A Heart Like Hers** by EvieSmallwood

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**Summary:**

Nancy Wheeler, the perfect poster child, is in love with two boys.

# A Heart Like Hers

## Author's Note:

- For [charlidarlin17](#), [anomalation](#).

Dedicating this work to my two friends Anna & Charlotte, who love the OT3 just as much as me.  
Hope you guys enjoy!

## *Foreword:*

Since before she could walk, Nancy Wheeler was nothing if not the perfect poster child.

It started with her parents, who were both indulgent and distant. From the start, they lived well; Nancy had every toy she wanted, the most perfect Christmases, and dozens of frilly pink dresses.

Week mornings were reserved for piano lessons, afternoons for dance. Sundays were for church.

When Mike was born—little Michael, with his mop of dark hair and his bright eyes and constant happy giggling—she felt the need to protect for the first time. She felt something in her chest; something raw and radiating, which totally consumed her. She'd sat there, nestled against her mother's side in that hospital bed with a blue bundle in her arms, and known love.

As Mike grew, she understood how something could be so good but flawed at the same time. For herself, she got perfect grades, had perfect posture, and always looked presentable. Mike... Mike had jam all over his hands for what seemed like the first whole five years. He had messy hair, he was loud (especially in church), and he spilled his drinks all over her pink dresses.

Even though he annoyed her, and sometimes drove her crazy, he somehow became her whole world.

When she started school, Mike cried until she came home. He'd done this every day until, for once, he was allowed to tag along. Nearly

three years old, wearing a striped shirt and overalls, he was her show-and-tell exhibit. She'd told her classmates all about her little brother; about his favourite shows on television and what books she read him. He'd sat in her lap playing with the locket she'd been gifted by her grandmother, muttering nonsensically the whole time.

They'd grown up together in that way that only siblings can; constantly surrounded with the presence of one another to the point of total frustration. With the frustration came the fighting, which was followed by guilt, and lastly resolve.

When they were both sick, they would sit on Mike's top bunk and eat chicken noodle soup, planning D&D campaigns until the late hours of the night, a blanket over their heads and a flashlight in hand.

Mike was all over the place. That was how he grew, how he made friends, how he spent his days. Never in one place. Constantly changing.

She stayed the same.

Nancy didn't meet Barb until the seventh grade. She'd been walking around the playground at recess, trying to look at least a little busy, when she'd seen the other girl.

She'd had long red hair with flowers braided into it, wearing clothes that didn't quite match the uniform scheme of their school. Head down, shoulders bowed, feet kicking at the gravel under the swing set.

Nancy had gravitated to Barb, sat down on the next swing, and the rest was history.

Barb was new. Her parents were normal; a stay at home mom and an accountant dad. Nancy had rejoiced in finding someone who also had a boring father. They'd clicked in an instant.

Barb liked flowers. She liked picking them, braiding them into crowns, pressing them into books, and sketching them. She knew almost every type, and would babble on about them for ages.

When Barb got her first pair of glasses, she'd cried for three whole hours in Nancy's bathroom. It was two weeks to freshman year, and not only had Barb been given the worst haircut of all time (at least, according to her mother), now she had to wear *spectacles*.

Nancy had done her best to cheer up her friend. She'd promised they didn't look bad, that she'd get better grades now because she could see the board. None of that did anything until Nancy had taken the clear frames and drawn a small daisy in permanent marker on the side. Barb had stopped crying.

Steve Harrington dropped into her world. He took everything over like cancer. He was dangerous, he was popular, and he was absolutely...

Nothing like she ever expected.

She'd seen the movies. She knew that the most popular guys were usually jerks who used girls to have sex. That had been what she'd expected out of him. A twisted part of her had *wanted* that. Maybe Steve didn't want another notch under his belt, but she'd wanted her first.

She had never expected him to stay.

(she had never expected him to come back)

But he did. Even after they'd slept together, he'd walked up to her in the hall. He'd tapped the butterflies on her locker door, smiled a smile that made her stomach flip, and kept coming back.

She had never expected to fall in love with him.

(but even when she had, it had only been half-love, ever tainted by something dark, and someone else)

She had been captured by his stupid half-smirk and his indulgent ways. Steve Harrington was somehow so much more indulgent than her parents, but instead of buying her frilly dresses and barbies, he gave her himself. It was so much more special. Her most prized

possession was every secret he told her, every kiss he gave her, every whispered drunken conversation in his empty house.

Barb died. Steve had even stayed through that.

But it had left Nancy stranded. She'd had the forbidden romance, the safe best friend, and the annoying little brother.

With Steve, she'd gotten a taste of what she really wanted. In the back of her mind, there was always some crazy fantasy. Some dark adventure. That was what had driven her to save up the money for their first D&D book, and what fuelled her to say 'yes' when Steve asked (in the midst of them making out, her back pressed against the cold bathroom tile and his lips on her neck, hot and sweet and consuming) 'go steady with me?'

Jonathan.

Jonathan was the most unexpected, most absolutely terrifying, positively absurd addition to her little circle.

He was the shadow who had always been present, during every birthday party and barbecue. He'd never spoken much, and he was usually sporting a split lip or a blackened eye. At first, Nancy had been stupid enough to think he must have gotten them from school fights. Then she'd seen the way Lonnie Byers gripped Joyce's wrists in her mother's kitchen. They'd thought they were alone. That no one was watching. He'd slapped her, and she hadn't even looked upset. Just pleaded with him to take her and the kids home.

Nancy had cried that evening; holed up in her bathroom, knees drawn to her chest as she sobbed for a woman she barely knew, and a boy she never spoke to, and little Will, who was pure sunshine in human form.

It wasn't fair. Life wasn't fair. It made you selfish, glutinous.

It made Nancy Wheeler crave anything that wasn't *safe*.

That was a secret, though. It was one she'd never told, to Steve or

Mike or even Barb. It was hidden behind her own denials and anxieties, behind ballerina costumes and pink walls and silk hair ribbons.

Jonathan had woken that up in her, though. At first, it had been like a monster lifting its head in the pit of her stomach. Every shot from that gun had made it more restless.

When she'd been dragged into that place, when she'd seen that thing, it had arched its back and yawned as it stretched, as she sobbed in her shower (this time for herself, and for Barb). She had scoured herself clean, because there was no way she would ever let her mother see dirt under her nails, and tried to level her breathing.

She'd come out feeling like there was still a layer of soap on her skin. Raw and new.

That was Jonathan. Kneeling on her floor, curled up in her bed. Only he wasn't really new. He had always been there, like a fly on the wall. He smelled like incense and sweat and something else.

Within days, her life had developed two opposite poles. It had destroyed the foundations of her world when those two poles collided; it had folded together and merged and exposed all of those secrets and lies and feelings. They'd stood there, the three of them, in the midst of that chaos. Different colours flashed across their faces, their trembling hands tightening around their weapons.

(in the back of her mind, Nancy had developed a thought, but it didn't take full form until almost a year later)

They had fought together. And then they had slipped away. Suddenly everything that was endearing about Steve had become insufferable, and everything mysterious about Jonathan had been laid out before her, and she was knowing and loving two people, but also hating them. Resenting them.

Nothing is ever as it seems. That was what Nancy had learned, through the thick and the thin. Jocks can be dorky, loners can be grounded, and pretty girls can have dark sides.

Everything was bullshit. Nothing was what it was. What she was thinking or feeling one day changed the next.

Loving Steve was like walking on thin ice. She kept waiting for it to crack, with her weight or his, or both of theirs. But she kept going, taking baby steps, because there was nothing else she could do.

Loving Jonathan was like walking through that dark forest at night, unsure and afraid, waiting for something to jump out and ruin it. Waiting for one of them to speak.

Her life had always been systematic. There were no surprises, there was no danger. And then all at once there was.

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*{ain't about to forget}*

She's standing on his bed, over him, with her arms folded across her chest. Jonathan is grinning up at her through a cloud of smoke. She feels dizzy.

"You're coming with me."

He laughs. "No way."

It's a testament to how high she is that she doesn't kick him. She's too afraid she might fall off his bed. Instead she leans down and plucks the joint from between his fingers.

There's an empty ashtray on his nightstand. But also, there's her own mouth. She puffs.

Jonathan is still laughing. She isn't really sure what's got him so amused. She shakes her head. "You are, Jonathan. I'm not going alone."

He sobers. "Why not?"

There are a thousand words on the tip of her tongue—they build pressure against her mouth, threatening to spill out and all over them both. *Because I'm scared. Because I haven't seen him since that morning. Because I still love him.* "I just... I don't want it to be awkward."

"Nance... the awkwardness increases by like one hundred percent when I'm there," he blinks up at her, scanning her face. "He hates me."

"He doesn't," she says. *He really doesn't.* "Just come, okay?"

"I'm high," Jonathan reminds her.

"Your mom can drive."

He scoffs, but she's already stepping off his bed and clutching his dresser for support. Jonathan makes to grab her ankle, but Nancy wards him off. She runs down the hall.

In the kitchen, Joyce is rolling cookie dough. A Kenny Rogers song plays from the stereo and she sings along in that adorable mom way of hers. She looks up when Nancy comes barreling in and wipes her forehead. "Hey, hon."

"Can you drive us to Steve's—"

"Nancy, stop—"

"We have to watch the kids while he does... something. He forgot to buy something. He has to go out and he needs us to come."

Jonathan is still talking over her. His protests are useless, though, because Joyce is already nodding. She's grinning, too, but she's too polite to laugh at their bloodshot eyes and slightly slurred words. "Yeah, sure."

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It's dark by the time they get to his place. Joyce has to practically shove Jonathan out of the car, and then she's speeding away so he can't get back in.

It's cold. Their breath comes out in white puffs. She feels sick.

Nancy walks up the path to the door anyway, trying her absolute best not to vomit. Jonathan trails after her; like a shadow, like a fly. She raps on the door.



It's not even him who opens it; it's Mike. Too tall, flushed, laughing at something one of his friends is yelling behind him. Her baby brother that she now has to look *up* at.

Nancy practically falls into his arms, which she knows confuses the hell out of him, but he pulls her closer anyway. "Missed you," she says.

"You saw me at breakfast," Mike reminds her, brow furrowed.

"Yeah, but that was hours ago."

Jonathan clears his throat behind her. "She's not exactly, uh..." he swallows. "Can we come in?"

Stupid asshole. He's like this so often, the pot barely has a lasting effect. Nancy rolls her eyes. She keeps her arm around Mike as they walk in, mostly because she's pretty sure she might fall without it.

Perfect princess Nancy Wheeler, about to throw up all over her brother's brand new chucks.

The kids are all gathered around the kitchen table, yelling over one another. Dustin is really the only one who bothers to greet her, and she smiles softly in response. She still feels guilty for all the times she slammed doors in his face and blatantly ignored him. He'd just been a kid, after all.

Still is. They all are. God, they're loud.

Not as loud as the thumping of sneakers on stairs, however. Steve Harrington, in all of his glory, practically trips into view. He looks effortlessly gorgeous. His hair is magnificent, and his sweater is red and soft-looking. She's never seen him in it, so she decides it must have been a Christmas gift.

He glances nervously at her, and then turns to Jonathan. "Okay, so, I should be back at like, eight—"

"*Eight?!*"

She winces at her own voice. Steve frowns. "Yeah. For my date."

Date. Right. It hadn't been shopping after all. What had he even *said* over the phone?

Date. *Fuck*.

"Anyway, there's thirty bucks on the counter for pizza, and plenty of stuff in the fridge. You guys can totally help yourselves."

He won't look at her. He looks at Jonathan, and the kids, and his shoes as he rubs the back of his neck. He's nervous; one step away from ruining his perfect hairdo by raking his fingers through it.

Jonathan meets Steve's eyes. "Okay," he says.

Steve nods. He's out his front door in a heartbeat. Nancy listens while his car revs to life and then peels out. She feels her heart sink.

*You did this. You let him slip through your fingers.*

It had been so exhausting, keeping up with the role of *Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington's Girlfriend*. It meant doing everything right, never making mistakes, and always looking perfect. She knew he wouldn't love her less if she hadn't done those things, but it had also been... a coping mechanism, she supposes.

Now she's standing in the middle of his kitchen with her brother by her side, hair tied back at the nape of her neck, wearing a sweater that doesn't belong to her and feeling like she's half on earth and half underground.

He's going on a date. It's only been four months.

God, has it really been four months?

Mike gently lets go of her hand. "You should eat something," he says, pulling away.

Nancy nods. She's never been less hungry.

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The kids are asleep in a pile by the time Steve gets home; it's ten or so, plenty dark outside, and almost equally as dark within the

Harrington household.

Nancy is pressed against Jonathan, hand over his heart, listening to his breathing. Jonathan has always been steady. He's solid, and structured, and he knows who he is. Maybe she needed that. Maybe that's why she chose him.

She hates that word. She never chose anyone, really, despite what they both think. There is a part of her heart in Steve and a part in Jonathan. She knows it'll always be that way, no matter what happens.

No matter where this goes.

The door is gently pried open. Light streams over the carpet in the sitting room—stark white. His shadow stands out against it. He curses under his breath as he trips over something—maybe a sneaker.

The kitchen light is flicked on, and he sees them all from there; curled up together, some snoring. Tangled limbs underneath barely used throw blankets.

They're all asleep except Nancy. She keeps her eyes on him until he notices her.

He tenses. "Nancy," Steve runs a hand through his hair. "Uh, hey. I'm sorry I'm home so late—"

He's going through his motions; slipping off his jacket, setting his keys on the counter, taking off his shoes. Doing anything but looking directly at her.

But Nancy is already slipping out of Jonathan's arms, which go limp against the couch. She walks over to the fridge, pulling out a soda. "How was your date?"

Steve swallows. "I... I didn't really have—" he gestures vaguely. "Y'know, a date."

Nancy raises her eyebrow, trying to mask the rush of relief she gets. Thank God. Thank God this crazy pursuit isn't without any merit whatsoever. "So... What were you up to?"

"It's Dustin's birthday next month," he explains. "I was getting him something. A gift."

"And that took three hours?"

She's seated at the kitchen table, looking up at him. At this ridiculous, flustered boy. She's looking at him, and wondering how in the *fuck* she ever took him for granted. She loves every inch of him, in some voluminous way. She loves the freckles on his nose that can't be seen unless one is *right in front of him*, and the way he's always struggling to articulate thought, and how his hands seem to naturally rest on his slim hips. She loves him so much it physically pains her in that moment to be so close. It's like someone is strangling her heart with a cord.

"I was doing other stuff," he looks at his shoes. "Confidential stuff."

"'Confidential'?"

"You're not..." he bites his lip. "This isn't..." his hands move back and forth in the empty space between them. "I don't have to tell you everything, Nancy."

She sobers. Who the fuck is she kidding. "Right. Yeah. Of course."

He nods slowly after a second, and then thanks her for looking after the kids. Nancy wants to tell him that it was no trouble, that she'd actually been looking for an excuse to hang out with her brother and his dorky friends, but all she can do is jerk her chin up.

Steve retreats to his room. His ugly room with the poster of the bikini-clad girl and his soft, cool bed.

Nancy doesn't drink the soda.

Fifteen minutes later, Joyce is pulling up to the drive to give them all (except Dustin and Lucas, who have arrangements to stay the night) rides home.

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They're staring up at her ceiling; knees up, hands on their stomachs, lips between teeth.

“Do you think he’ll leave her?”

Nancy glances at her brother. She takes in the way he’s grown. Somehow, over the years, he’d gone from a twirpy little kid to... whatever he is now. Long-limbed, dark haired, and too old for his age. His eyes are no longer wide and innocent, but dark. There’s so much hidden in them. She wishes very suddenly that they were both still small, still hiding on his top bunk and playing go-fish.

“I don’t know,” she replies. She really doesn’t. Nothing is as it seems.

Or maybe that doesn’t apply here, with her blatantly obvious parents. Her mom’s drinking and her dad’s vacant tendencies. They try to hide their marital issues behind stoic silences at the dinner table that are supposed to pass for peaceful, and closed doors.

The door is wide open, now, though. They’re yelling more than they have in so long.

Mike frowns, and then all at once he’s spilling. His chin wavers and his eyes grow misty, and she pulls him close so that his sobbing is at least muffled. “It’ll be okay,” she promises, even though it’s one she can’t keep.

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It was the comfort that she missed the most.

Steve had been... he’d been a little wild. A little more rebellious than she was used to. But most nights, after they’d had a couple of beers or returned from a party, things were peaceful. They would go up to his room and lay in his bed, curled into one another like two puzzle pieces trying desperately to fit. That, or they would fill his vacant house with sound; music, television, radios—all playing at once while they danced in his gigantic living area, talking in low tones.

She missed that, yeah.

And she missed him.

His smell, his lips, his words. The way he was constantly there for her, knowing that she needed him (even if she hadn’t known it, even if she’d denied it). He’d needed her, too. More than she’d realised.

He smelt like expensive cologne and laundry detergent. Sometimes he was a headache.

Jonathan didn't wear cologne. The smoke of his cigarettes clung to his usually-dark clothes. He was overpoweringly warm; everything about him was familiar and welcoming.

It had been such a shock, to see him so relaxed in his dimly lit bedroom—stretched out on his bed like a cat, grinning at her. Being with Jonathan had always cleansed her pallet of Steve, like going to the mall and sniffing coffee beans after sampling too much perfume.

It was during a moment like that—they'd been in his room, listening to a Sonic Youth record—that it had come to her.

(equilibrium)

It had been a low buzzing. A pulse that sent a shiver down her spine.

She and Steve... it hadn't worked because he'd wanted too much and she had needed someone else. It wasn't really that she hadn't wanted what he did (*forever*) just that she had known, somewhere inside, that there was another step to take before they could reach a balance.

Their pieces hadn't fit because something was missing.

It was a while before she got the courage to say anything—around the end of April, as it drizzled lightly outside. She was nestled against his side while he hummed along to the beat of a song. His chest vibrated against her palm, which was flat over his heart.

"I love you," she'd whispered. It hadn't been the first time she'd said it—that had been Christmas Eve—but it had been the first time she'd really, actually meant it. The love had filled her chest and then her heart and spilled straight out of her mouth.

Jonathan seemed to sense that. He stopped humming and opened his eyes (his fucking gorgeous brown eyes, all full of puppy dog wonder and innocence). "I love you, too," he'd replied, awe filling the edges of his voice.

"But I have something to tell you."

He'd waited, silent. Jonathan always let her speak, always let her formulate her thoughts so that they were at least coherent. She didn't have to be nervous; it's not like he was going to dump her on the spot.

But she didn't want to ruin this good thing.

(sometimes it has to get worse before it gets better)

"I love Steve, too."

Jonathan blinked, and then nodded. "Yeah, I know."

She sucked in a breath. "But I don't think I'm ever gonna get over it."

She waited for him to suggest they stop this, for him to get upset, but to her surprise (he never, ever stopped surprising her) his lip quirked upward. "Yeah, Nancy. I know."

Nancy let all of her tension bleed away, let the confusion replace it. She sat up, leaning over him. "Jonathan..."

He might have actually been a little hurt, a week ago. He might have been unable to understand; to comprehend the lurid magnet that was Steve Harrington. But that was a week ago, and this was today.

"I like him."

-interlude: a week ago-

Jonathan slipped out of his car, chest burning with frustration. He was soaked from the rain almost instantly—water seeping through his clothes and chilling his bones.

He knelt down to inspect the tire, but quickly came to the conclusion that there was no salvaging it. The rubber had completely blown out.

Fuck.

Jon's teeth began to chatter. Knowing he didn't have a spare, he slipped back into his car and shut the door.

He couldn't feel his hands. The tips of his fingers were already blue. He found himself debating whether or not he should just drive home on the flat when headlights flashed in his rear view mirror.

He tensed, leaning around to look.

Red. Expensive. BMW.

*Steve Harrington.*

"Fuck."

Jonathan pursed his lips as Steve hopped out of his car. He eyed his lock, wondering if it would be rude to just push it down and ignore Steve altogether. He'd go away. Probably.

Steve knocked on the window. His eyes were dark with concern. Suddenly there was no ignoring that; only moving a finger to roll the glass pane down.

"Need a ride?"

*Maybe I can walk. It's not far. Maybe I can just—oh, for fuck's sake*  
—"Yeah."

Steve nodded like it was the answer he'd been expecting. Jonathan rolled up the window, snagged his keys, and slipped out.

They looked at one another for a moment, as stupid as that was. Steve's hair was plastered to his forehead; there was no volume to it now. He suddenly looked so much younger. Just the seventeen year old boy he really was. Raindrops trickled down his face, clinging to his lips and cheeks, glowing with the reflection of the headlights. Stars. They were like stars on his fucking face.

Jon abruptly turned away and marched toward the car. The passenger door was unlocked, thank God; it would have been embarrassing to stand there like an idiot while Steve caught up.

They didn't talk, really, as they pulled away from the LTD. It went something like:



“Radio?”

“Yeah.”

“Warm enough?”

“Sure.”

“Cool.”

That didn’t change until they pulled up in front of Jon’s house. It was dark inside. His mom had work until nine, and Will was staying over at Dustin’s.

“I’ll pay for the tow.”

Jon turned to him, eyebrows raised. “No thanks.”

“No, seriously,” Steve’s hand curled around his steering wheel. It was stark white from the cold. “It’s the least I can do.”

Jonathan couldn’t help it. “The least you can do? For *what?! If* anyone’s fucked up here, it’s me.”

Steve frowned. “I never apologised. For the things I said, you know. In that alley.”

“Jesus,” Jonathan turned back to his house. They’d moved on from that. They were so far away it was like they were living completely different lives. “You’re still holding that over your head?”

Steve winced. “Well, yeah.”

“Are you kidding? You saved us. You’ve saved all of our lives, and what do I do in return? I think we’re even—fuck, if anything, the scale is tipped in *your* favour.”

“There’s a scale now?”

“There’s always been a scale.”

Since seventh grade. Since Steve had first glared his way. Since Jonathan had first really talked to Nancy.

Steve let out a low breath. “Byers—”

“Jonathan.”

He turned to Steve, watched his mouth open a little in surprise, and felt something inside of him stir.

(because sure, the first time he'd seen Steve, before that glare, he'd thought: wow. it hadn't really been anything coherent, and it had vanished just as quickly as it had come, but it had left behind a warmth. a kindling.)

If Jonathan had been cold before, it was gone. He felt like a layer of ice was melting off of his skin.

Steve's eyes were dark. They seemed endless, and full of confusion. Full of what they all shared; trauma. Scarring. Nightmares.

He swallowed. “Jonathan.”

*That's my name. Out of his mouth.*

*(wow)*

*Shut up. I still hate him.*

“Yeah?”

“I'm sorry.”

*Oh fuck.*

“I'm sorry, too.”

*What?!*

Steve's mouth turned upward a little in the corner. Jonathan found himself taking in all of the things he hadn't noticed before; the little freckles and moles that dotted his skin (there was one on his cheek), the expensive cologne he wore...

*Shit.*

“I gotta go, now.”

“Right.” Steve nodded. “I’ll, uh... I’ll call the tow.”

*Right.* “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Jonathan slipped out, moving up to the porch as quickly as he could. His heart was racing.

He looked back as the car pulled away and felt flames ignite in his chest.

---

“You like him?”

She stared up at him, brow furrowed, but eyes full of hope. Jonathan wasn’t even nervous. He could tell her anything and he knew that. And this? She knew what it felt like to be in love with Steve Harrington more than anyone.

Not that he was *in love*.

“Yeah. I do.”

---

*{colour in your cheeks}*

Summer came, accompanied by suffocating heat and resolutions for them both.

Jonathan doesn’t talk much about it after that night, but she catches him staring Steve’s way more than once during their last few weeks of school.

His cheeks always flame and he rolls his eyes at her.

She grins in return, because she can’t believe this is actually happening.

Except, of course, it’s not happening yet.

---

They don't go to church anymore.

Nancy spends Sunday morning curled up on the floor with her brother, watching cartoons and eating cereal. Their dad is mowing the lawns and their mom is shopping.

There haven't been many fights, lately; mostly because their parents have learned how to ignore each other. They're all coexisting, suffering alone in their darkened corners.

Nancy tugs on Mike's hair. It's slowly starting to curl, which is something she'd never really expected. "What are you doing today?"

Mike rolls his eyes, and she knows what he's thinking; she's been getting a lot sappier lately. With him, and with Holly. She doesn't really know why; maybe it's because of all of the arguing, and the distance. Maybe she just wants them to have something (someone) to count on.

"I thought I'd hang out with the guys," he says, around a mouth of Rainbow Brite. "Maybe go to Dustin's. What about you?"

She doesn't really know. Last year, she'd had a small job tutoring kids for summer school—but the positions had been filled before she could even sign up this time. And with Barb gone... "I guess I'll just hang around the house."

Mike raises an eyebrow. "You're not gonna see Jonathan?"

Nancy bites her lip. It's not that she doesn't want to, it's just... "I don't want my life to revolve around him," she finds herself confiding. "I have to... I need something else."

Her brother nods with understanding. "That makes sense," he says. "You know... there's a job opening at that diner on Dearborn—you know, the one Hopper took us to after the fight?"

She remembers; they'd been there together—the kids huddled in a booth, ridiculously rowdy, while she, Jonathan, and Steve had perched at the counter beside Hopper. They'd had coffee and waited for Will and El to wake up.

“You think I should wait tables?”

Mike studies her. “I don't know. Maybe you'll be good at it. Besides, it's better pay than you're making now.”

“Which is zilch.”

He grins. “Exactly. Maybe check it out, huh?”

Nancy nods. “Yeah. I'll do that.”

They turn back to the TV just as He-Man raises his Power Sword. “*I HAVE THE POWER!*”

She wonders when her little brother became less of an annoying dweeb and more of a friend.

---

She gets the job.

The owner, an older man with wrinkles around his eyes named Marty, virtually hires her on the spot. He looks so desperate she almost feels sorry for him.

The place is pretty slow. There are about three regulars—a lumberjack type, a fisherman, and Hopper.

Nancy doesn't see him the first day, which she spends learning the ropes; wiping counters, washing dishes, carrying out food. It's pretty easy work, and decent pay (and Marty is nice).

All in all, things could be worse. She could be spending her summer huddled up in the house with her mom and baby sister.

On her second day, Jonathan comes in. He grins when he sees her, walking up to the counter and sitting down. She soaks in the sight of him, realising that she'd been so exhausted after her shift last night

she hadn't even called him to tell him the news. "I see Will wasn't full of shit," he says, setting his keys on the counter.

Nancy rolls her eyes, regret ebbing away a little. She grabs him a mug from above and pours it full of coffee; black, the way he likes it. "So me working is unrealistic?"

He suddenly looks a little alarmed. "No! No, it just seemed kind of... sudden."

"Yeah, well," she shrugs, "I was bored."

Jonathan smirks. "You've been on vacation for forty-eight hours."

She leans forward a little, ready to give him some snarky reply, or maybe just kiss him (which she hasn't done for too long of a time), when the bell chimes. Nancy's head snaps up.

It's Hopper, which isn't exactly a surprise, given the time. It's his company that makes her eyes widen.

"Steve?!"

Her voice is a little too high, a little too incredulous. His eyebrows shoot straight up and he freezes in place. "Nancy."

One of his hands is still on the door. He's halfway out, and suddenly she's worried he might bolt there and then.

But Hopper claps a hand down on Steve's shoulder and drags him forward a little. "C'mon, kid."

Steve keeps his head down as Hopper leads him to the booth in the back. The leather cracks a bit as they settle into it. Nancy still can't take her eyes off of them (and neither, it seems, can Jonathan).

*What the hell...?*

They turn to one another, cheeks flaming. Jonathan's mouth is open a little. "What is he—?"

"*I don't know*," she hisses back. "I haven't heard from him in weeks."

“Can we get some coffee over here, Nancy?”

She almost jerks away from Jonathan. “Uh—yeah. Sorry.”

Any excuse to be close to him. Any excuse to satisfy the heavy throbbing in her chest. It feels almost like a magnet, pulling her to him and wanting nothing more than to lock on. That’s a little how it feels with Jonathan, but it’s somehow not as intense. He’s more of an easy, less dramatic force. He welcomes her with open arms.

Steve resists. He taps his fingers on the linoleum table while she pours their coffee.

Hopper meets her inquisitive gaze. “How’re you?”

He’d asked that yesterday. Just like then, she replies, “Fine,” and then, “you? El?”

Hop sips his drink. If they were anywhere else, he probably would have told her to shut her trap—but everyone here knows, and Marty is asleep in the back. “Good. She just finished all her sixth grade material.”

Nancy can’t help the grin that spreads across her face. She knows how hard El has been working; day after day, studying by herself or with her friends. “Only two more grades to go,” she says.

“She’s a fucking genius,” Hopper says, seemingly in agreement.

Nancy nods. It’s true, and they all know it. She takes the opportunity to back away from the table, hurrying back over to the counter. She ignores Jonathan’s inquisitive gaze; there’s nothing to say. Maybe they’re just having lunch together. Maybe—

“There’s a spot in the academy waiting for you this fall,” Hopper is saying, voice low. “Now, I know your grades aren’t top notch, but neither were mine. I think you’ll do good.”

Steve nods, cradling his mug in his hands. “You didn’t like, say anything to them, right? Pull strings?”

“No.” Hop’s voice is firm on that one. “They know you’ve got

potential. Speaking of which, I was thinking you could intern for us at the station over the summer. Get a head start, and all that.”

Steve barely mulls it over. “Yeah, absolutely.”

He sounds... excited. He sounds *thrilled*. Nancy feels her heart race and her head swim at the same time. It’s a little jarring, the whole thing. Steve, working for Hop? Steve, a cop?

It doesn’t even seem *wrong*. It just hurts, very suddenly, that she hadn’t been there when he’d figured out this was what he wanted. That he hadn’t told her.

But why would he?

Jonathan is watching her carefully. She shakes her head, almost imperceptibly (or so she hopes) and slides a piece of pie across the counter toward him.

Not fucking today.

---

It’s dark outside when she gets off. Nancy waves goodbye to Marty and slips outside. The night breeze is cooler than she’d expected, and her automatic reaction to the chill is to light a cigarette.

The embers are easily visible in the blue hue of the night. She exhales a cloud of smoke and makes her way over to her car, fumbling around in her purse for her keys.

“Nance.”

She jumps, rounding at the sound of his voice. Steve is leaning against his car—Jesus, she hadn’t even seen it—with his hands tucked deep in his jean pockets.

“Don’t tell me you’ve been waiting here all day,” she says. The words roll out of her mouth like they’ve been stuck there for eighty years, like they’re *desperate* to get free. She’s desperate to talk to him. It’s a constant ache, but here is her solution.

Steve smiles that stupid half smile and she realises right then and



there that she will never stop loving him. There isn't anything he could do. His love is a part of her now, just like the scar on her back. Just like Jonathan.

"Nah," he says. "I uh, I wanted to talk to you."

She walks closer. "About?"

"I know you overheard that conversation." He holds up a hand when she opens her mouth (even though she doesn't really know what she plans to say). "It's cool, Nance. I get it. I just... I'm serious about this, okay? Like, more serious than I ever have been with anything before."

That's big. That means this is more important than basketball, or any other sport. It's more important than the idea of college or impressing his parents. It's maybe more important than her (but she doesn't know if their relationship is on that list of things; she's suddenly very desperate to gain that knowledge). "Wow."

It's all she can say, and it sounds a little stupid in her ears, but it's all better when he smiles that dopey smile and scuffs his sneaker in the gravel. "Yeah, I guess."

His face is illuminated by the neon lights in the window of the diner. They make his cheeks red, his forehead green, and his neck blue. He's a multifaceted masterpiece, and he makes her stomach fill up with the entire ocean. She feels it rock the walls of her insides as she stares at him, trying her very best to accept the idea that he will never again be hers.

She can't do it. She just can't fucking do it.

"Are we okay?"

*(I'm never sure)*

He seems taken by surprise, but then he smiles again. "Yeah, Nance. We're good."

She doesn't even hesitate. "So then... can Jonathan and I hang out with you? Tonight?"

It's abrupt, and she knows that. She can see that in the way the colour drains from his face. Steve's hands ball up in his pockets. "The both of you?"

Nancy nods. "He—He wants to be friends, I think. With you."

Steve exhales. His eyes drift toward the road, and she watches him consider. His jaw works, which means he's gnawing at his cheek again. "Yeah, okay," he says, after a minute. "Gotta start somewhere, right?"

---

*{somewhere}*

She's drunk.

She's drunk and she knows that. She embraces that fact wholly; embraces her state. Her whole body feels warm. Her head is light.

They're sprawled out on Steve's barely used furniture, each on their own separate couch. It had been awkward at first, but once the drinking had started, that had faded away.

Nancy has had exactly two beers and three shots of the finest whiskey in Indiana. It's not enough to get most people hammered, but for her size... it's a lot, to say the least.

"You know," Steve twists his whole body one-hundred-and-eighty degrees, so that his legs aren't resting on the upper part of the couch anymore, "you two are a really cute couple."

"Are we?"

It's Jonathan who asks this, but he doesn't sound doubtful. More amused.

Amused, because this is the third time Steve's said something like that in the two hours they've been here.

"Yeah. Like, you just compliment each other real well, y'know? You're like, pleasing to look at. I like looking at the two of you." He's slurring his words a little, cheeks flaming, and unable to stop. "I

just... I see you, and I'm like, how do they not even know? Jonathan, how do you not know how cool you are?"

"I'm cool?"

There's the genuine surprise. Nancy laughs abruptly, and then hiccups. "Steve," she breathes. "You're so drunk."

"I fucking miss you."

Her throat closes up. She stares down into the mouth of the whiskey bottle she's been cradling, frowning. "I miss you too."

Steve stands. He sways on the spot just a tiny bit, and then walks over to her. He holds out a hand, which she takes. She thinks he wants to dance with her, so it's a little confusing when he walks her over to Jonathan and pulls him up too.

"Let's go swimming."

Oh.

---

The pool is steaming. Vapor swirls skyward in little curls, fading out into the black night. Nancy hugs herself.

She hasn't really been near the pool since Barb. During the duration of her relationship with Steve, she'd pretty much avoided his house as much as possible.

*This is where she died*, a part of her screams.

*This is where you need to start living*, her heart yells back.

She doesn't give herself the chance to contemplate it further. Nancy closes her eyes, sucks in a breath, and throws herself into the water. It's almost an instinctual act. It feels like she's being baptised.

Being completely submerged is actually blissfully refreshing. She feels most of her drunken haze creeping away, and her pores explode open all over her body. The sounds of the forest are drowned out by the loud bubbling of the jets.

Nancy stretches her arm out, staring at the light hairs that are raised and visible on her ultra-pale arm. Then she kicks upward and breaks through the surface.

Steve and Jonathan are staring at her. They're shirtless and waist deep in the pool, both of them dampened and small-looking.

"Okay?" asks Jonathan. He always knows when she's not. In that moment he's perfect.

She nods, wading a little closer, and lets herself grin. "Yeah."

It goes like that between the three of them for a while; they dunk their heads underwater, race the length of the pool, and float on their backs. It's ridiculously peaceful.

And then something happens.

Nancy is alone in the middle, staring at the stars. She can't hear, because the water is up to her ears, but she's very aware that the boys are on the steps and talking.

She looks.

It isn't a mistake.

Steve's hand is on Jonathan's cheek. Jonathan is staring right at Steve's lips, which are slowly getting closer, and closer...

She doesn't know how this happened. She's very aware that the two of them have had their own development, and that path has been adjacent to the ones she shares with them both—but she hadn't had any idea that they were there yet.

Hell, she hadn't even known she was.

They kiss, and it's somehow contradictory; the way they keep breaking apart and going back for more, hungry and desperate, but hesitant, too.

Scared.

They're both shaking.

So is she.

Her heart is pounding in her chest.

Nancy is no longer on her back. She wades the short distance over and comes up to the wall. Her teeth chatter. She swallows. There's so much she wants to say, but all that comes out is:

"Do you guys get it, now?"

They look at her, away from each other. Steve is panting a little. Jonathan looks a little hunched, like he wants to crawl inside of himself; he's like a deer caught in the headlights.

Steve bites his lip. His eyes are full of hopes and wants and needs. "Let's go inside," he says.

They do. They're dripping wet, shivering, and nervous, but they make it. Nancy closes the sliding door and turns to them both. "It's about fucking time," she says.

Steve laughs. He sounds so startled, and so relieved, at the same time. He grabs her by the wrist and pulls her to him, and Jesus it's like coming home. She lets him wrap his arms around her, lets him press his cold lips to her cold lips.

They're both freezing, and it's uncomfortable, but it's *right*. She feels so safe there; with them both.

When they pull away, Jonathan is looking between them. "Fuck," he breathes.

Steve's face splits. "Wanna?"

It makes them both laugh. Nancy doesn't know what it is, exactly, that started this. She doesn't know if it's because Steve came back, or Jonathan never left, or she never let either of them go. All she knows is that she never wants it to end.

And that's how that happens.

## Author's Note:

After thinking about this fic a lot more and gaining a deeper understanding of why I felt the way I did and just what the fuck I was writing about (sometimes I don't get my underlying themes until they're pointed out to me lol) I've decided to edit this end note from the previous "this story sux but if you like it lemme know" bullshit.

I think the reason I was so hesitant about posting this story and writing it was because I knew it would end with them all together and honestly, just like Nancy, I was just trying to get there. Throughout this whole fic Nancy is very aware of her feelings for both boys, so there's no big realisation moment for her. She's just waiting on them, which is frustrating and exhausting for her (but she also doesn't want to get her hopes up, or admit what exactly it is she's waiting for). I guess the situation kind of lacks that whole big climax, and instead goes for something smaller and more real. Two bros making out in a hot tub because they ARE gay.

Anyway!

I AM thinking a little about a sequel, but it wouldn't really be a "morning after" sort of thing. More like "ten years down the line and this is where we are". Let me know if you're interested in that.

Thank you for reading! xoxo